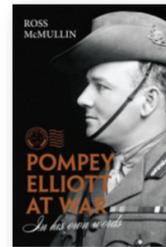


BOOK REVIEWS:

Pompey Elliott at war – in his own words

by Ross McMullin

Scribe Publications: Brunswick, Vic.; 2017; 544 pp.; ISBN 9781925322415 (hardcover); RRP \$59.99, Ursula Davidson Library call number 570.3 MCMU 2017



Major-General Harold Edward “Pompey” Elliott, CB, CMG, DSO, DCM, VD (1878–1931), a Boer War veteran, was an officer in the Australian Imperial Force during the Great War and, post-war, was a senator representing Victoria in the Commonwealth parliament. Ross McMullin, the author of Elliott’s biography, *Pompey Elliott* (Scribe, 2002), has collected Elliott’s own words from letters, speeches and diary entries and shaped them into a compelling narrative that follows the course of Elliott’s war.

Elliott was prominent in iconic battles and numerous controversies. As a battalion commander on Gallipoli, he was wounded during the landing, and four of his men were awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous bravery at Lone Pine. As a brigadier-general commanding the 15th Brigade (a Victorian brigade), 5th Australian Division, on the Western Front, Elliott played prominent roles at Fromelles in 1916 and in turning defeat into victory at both Polygon Wood in 1917 and Villers–Bretonneux in 1918. McMullin claims that no Australian general was more revered by those he led or more famous outside his own command, but other historians would dispute this. There were several Australian generals who were equally, if not more, revered by their men.

In his correspondence, he maintained a no-secrets pact with his wife throughout the war. The letters and diaries are forthright. Elliott wrote frankly about what happened to him and the men he commanded, and

about what he felt about both. He is candid about his volatile emotions. He wrote with fertile imagery and an engaging turn of phrase. His letters to his young children turned even the Western Front into a bedtime story.

McMullin is an historian and biographer who has written extensively about Australia’s involvement in the First World War. His most recent book, *Farewell, Dear People: biographies of Australia’s lost generation* (Scribe, 2012), was awarded the Prime Minister’s Prize for Australian History.

Pompey Elliott at War includes a note on sources, an explanation of ‘Pompey idioms’, 16 pages of black-and-white photographs, six clear maps, three charts of formations and commanders, a list of abbreviations, a family tree, notes, and an index. McMullin provides context for the quotes throughout the 25 chapters – but sufficiently lightly so as not to take anything away from Elliott’s own prose.

The book provides a powerful insight into the mind and character of a significant wartime personality. That Elliott argued forcefully for government support for veterans and continued to serve as a senator after the war are more understandable from reading this book – as is his suicide in 1931. *Pompey Elliott at War* is recommended to those who have a deep interest in Australian military history or who are looking for a more humanistic account of the First World War.

Marcus Fielding